

# **Common Challenges Faced by Rural Principals: A Review of the Literature**

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*Within this article, we thematically present common challenges associated with the role of the rural principal. In this literature review, we delimit our search to work published from 2003–2013. A limitation of this study is that it represents data predominantly from American, Canadian, and Australian rural settings, restricting a global applicability of results. Findings highlight that many rural principal candidates face a hiring disadvantage if they do not have a historical connection with the community advertising a position. Additional challenges include juggling diverse responsibilities, lack of professional development and resources, gender discrimination, and issues surrounding school accountability and change. This information is beneficial for researchers, policymaker, senior educational leaders, principals, vice-principals, teachers, parents, and community members interested in school leadership within rural communities. We conclude that to be successful, rural principals must be able to nimbly mediate relations within the local community and the larger school system.*

**Key Words:** challenges for rural principals; gender equity, school community relations, small schools

Considerable research has verified a strong link between effective leadership practices and high levels of student learning and achievement (Leithwood, 2005; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009; Reardon, 2011; Robinson, 2011; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). These days, the roles and responsibilities of principals are increasingly focused on strengthening instructional leadership, thereby, spotlighting the importance of continue professional development for principals (Spanneut, Tobin, & Ayers, 2013). Although research has verified the impact and current needs of school principals, limited research has targeted the *rural* principal and his/her unique needs and circumstances. When focusing on the effectiveness of leadership in rural schools, research highlights that rural principals commonly face specific sociocultural and economic challenges associated with the school community. In order to promote effective leadership policies, practices, and programs within rural contexts, educational stakeholders need to understand the unique situation faced by the rural principal. In response, this paper is a literature review where we thematically outline the challenges commonly associated with the role of the rural principal.

With regard to this literature review, we delimited our search to include only literature published within the past decade (i.e., 2003–2013) so that it represents current literature on the challenges associated with the rural principalship. While conducting this literature review, a limitation we identified was the general lack of research addressing the challenges that principals face in specifically in rural communities (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005; Institute for Educational Leadership [IEL], 2005); Furthermore, the research that was available emanated predominantly from American, Canadian, and Australian rural settings, limiting the global applications of results. A second limitation is the lack of a common definition or portrayal of the term *rural*. For example, the United States Census Bureau (2013) stated that rural encompasses all populations existing outside urban clusters (2,500–50,000 people) or urbanized areas (50,000 or more people). In contrast, Bollman and Alasia (2011) (representing Statistics Canada) defined rural as any population in towns or municipalities outside the commuting zone of urban centres with a population of 10,000 or more people. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2011) defined rural and remote areas as all settlements of less than 1,000 people; however, the Australian

Government (2013) defined rural and remote areas as any center with a population less than 10,000. Other countries depict rural on the basis of economic activities (e.g., agriculture and farming), natural surroundings or environment (e.g., arable, forest, etc.), or services available in a catchment area, for example, hospitals, stores (Pizzoli & Gong, 2007). In addition, to these international and federal discrepancies, research scholars do not use a standard definition for rural, either. During our review of the literature, when researchers presented their rural findings, the vast majority of authors did not explicitly state the definition of rural they used for their study. In response to these constraints, we support the United States Department of Agriculture's (2013) assertion that researchers and policymakers need to choose from the alternate rural definitions available or create and stipulate their own unique definition. For our review of the literature, we automatically included research that exposed any school community with a population of less than 10,000. If no quantifiable definition of rural was provided but the author portrayed the school as rural, we recognized the authors' research integrity and included the study in our review.

### **Research Design and Analysis of Data**

The research design used for this study was document analysis, which involves collection and analysis of available data published on a specific topic, research question, or social phenomenon for the purpose of finding and/or understanding patterns and thematic regularities (Bowen, 2009). Interestingly, we began by collecting documents targeting both the benefits *and* challenges of the rural principalship. We assumed that a literature analysis could quite easily be completed on this dual topic; however, early in our search, we found that data were extremely limited data with regard to the benefits associated with the rural principalship. Thus, we refined our research to focus only on the challenges. With this narrower focus, our research was completed in three main phases.

The first phase was an extensive document search using the University of Prince Edward Island's (UPEI) (Canada) library database system to access potential books, chapters in books, academic journals, conference papers, dissertations, newspapers, magazines, and Internet documents. To begin this search, we typed in keywords like "educat<sup>1</sup>" "principal\*" "leader\*" "admin\*",

<sup>1</sup> For many library searches, typing a term in a search engine will only match complete occurrences of the term. In contrast, adding the special character "\*" to the root of a term enables the search to

"challenge\*", "barrier\*", "school\*", "rural" "principal\*" "lead\*" "admin\*", "elementary," "high school," and "small." We conducted these searches using both single and amalgamated terms. We retrieved hard copies of any materials housed directly within UPEI's library. In particular, to obtain journal articles and other published research, we used the databases *Academic Search Complete*, *CBCA Education* (*Proquest*), *ERIC (EBSCOhost)*, *PsycINFO*, *Education Research Complete*, *Google Scholar*, and others. We examined each *hit* by reading the title and abstract (where applicable) and performing a quick scan of the document (where applicable). We generated a list of resources and subdivided these resources into draft themes through GoogleDrive, application tool that allowed the three researchers to simultaneously work on one developing list<sup>2</sup>.

Our next phase of the research involved gaining a deeper understanding of the data. We reviewed an exhausted resource list and printed hard copies of most available sources. With this physical data *in front of us*, we read each source in detail while using a marker to highlight key findings and features embedded in the literature. In the margins of the printed documents, we summarized the main points, phrases, and findings emanating from our understanding of the literature. This second phase of research focused on coding the resources for patterns and common terms and placing these documents into refined themes (Patton, 2002).

Our final phase of research involved our research team meeting to discuss these pre-coded data. In turn, we generated five overarching themes that addressed challenges associated with the rural principalship. These themes were: (a) personal history and community focus; (b) diverse roles and the retention of principals; (c) lack of professional development and resources; (d) gender discrimination; and (e) school accountability and change.

### **Challenges of the Rural Principalship**

Compared to urban principals, rural principals face unique challenges. In what follows, we explicate thematic issues.

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include extensions of that phrase (e.g., the plural of the term, suffixes added to the term, etc.). For example, when typing "principal\*", the search would also automatically include principals and principalship.

<sup>2</sup> It is noteworthy to add that during this phase (and subsequent phases) we found *The Rural Educator* to be one academic journal, in particular, that contained much relevant information for our research.

## **Personal History and Community Focus**

To attain a principal position in a rural school, it is beneficial to have some type of affiliation with the school community that is seeking a school principal. In Cruzeiro and Boone's (2009) study, which documented the selection of principals in rural school districts in Nebraska and Texas, rural superintendents placed great value on the ability of potential principals to understand and fit into the political and social context of the local community. In a case study involving interviews with four rural high school principals in central Pennsylvania, Schuman (2010) found that possessing personal and/or historical ties to the community advertising a principal position positively impacted a principal's ability to obtain a job with the rural school. Montgomery's (2010) mixed-method case study conducted in 28 school districts in Nebraska yielded similar results. In a British Columbia (Canada) case study, Foster and Goddard (2003) found that principals who were raised in the community where they were the current administrator had a greater understanding of and deep appreciation for the values, priorities, and culture of the community members. Possessing this personal-historical link to the school community is particularly helpful when principals have to deal with tensions that sometimes spill into the school from stakeholder community groups (Foster & Goddard, 2003; Lock, Budgen, & Lunay, 2012). In contrast, research also highlights that rural principals who do not share social, political, historical, cultural, or ethical familiarity with the school they lead are often viewed with suspicion by community members (Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006; Keddie & Niesche, 2012). An undercurrent of these studies is that the recruitment of rural principals is challenging, because school board trustees and hiring personnel appear to value candidates who possess a panoramic, personal, and historical understanding of the cultural, social, political, historical, and economical foundations of the school community (IEL, 2005; Reynolds, White, Brayman, & Moore, 2008).

Upon attaining a rural principal position, parent and community members tend to scrutinize the actions of the principal and place exceedingly high expectations upon their school leader (IEL, 2005; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009). In a study involving eight rural principals located in remote parts of Australia, Lock et al. (2012) found that rural leaders struggled with lack personal privacy. The school leader is expected to nimbly relate to the rural lifestyle, live within the school community, join local organizations, participate in local events, and act as a professional, behavioural, social, cultural, and

spiritual role model (Clarke & Stevens, 2006; Clarke & Wildy, 2004; Harmon & Schafft, 2009). In Budge's (2006) study, which involved one American rural school district, one principal participant indicated that gaining respect within the community necessitated listing his telephone number in the local phonebook and frequently taking personal time outside of school hours to respond to the outside-of-school needs of parents and community members. In Lock et al.'s (2012) study, a principal attributed the rural principalship to being "public property" and "on call to the community 24 hours a day" (p. 70). In analyzing these points, being the principal of a rural school is more than just a job; it is a lifestyle that tends to be closely watched by many local community members.

A number of studies show that the rural principal must dedicate time and effort toward forming strong school-community relations by promoting a sense of mutuality, understanding, harmony, accord, confidence, and respect between school and community organizations (Hands, 2012; Harmon & Schafft, 2009). Barley and Beesley's (2007) study involving 21 American rural schools highlighted that rural principals believed it was important that they regularly interact with community members outside of school hours. These principals also believed that their involvement with community events supported teacher retention and promoted trust between the community and the school. Not only are rural principals accountable to the wellbeing of teachers and students, they are often indirectly held accountable to the welfare of the school community (Auerbach, 2012; Clarke & Stevens, 2006; Clarke & Wildy, 2004; Harmon & Schafft, 2009). Successful rural principals realize that the school is a symbol of the community's social wealth, economic prosperity, and overall identity. Research shows that rural principals who recognize and support this intimate school-community bond are more likely to be successful (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Chance & Segura, 2009; Harmon & Schafft, 2009).

A channel often used by the rural principal to strengthen the school-community bond is parent involvement including, in particular, parent participation via school councils (Foster & Goddard, 2003; Preston, 2010). In an effort to produce higher levels of student achievement, within the past two decades, a spate of educational reforms has emphasized parental involvement via school councils (Preston, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2012). Yet, with regard to rural principals, research highlights that rural school leaders sometimes view parents, community interest, and/or community values as a barrier to improving student academic achievement (Arnold et al., 2005; Budge, 2006; Corbett, 2007; Larson &

Howley, 2006). As Farmer (2009) indicated in his conceptual paper, balancing political interests of special interest groups such as parent-teacher associations can be a challenge for the principal. Through a case study involving five Canadian principals, Blakesley (2012) found that principals extend great effort “to convince parents to shift their views on teaching, learning, and what constitutes ‘education’ with respect to time spent on field trips” (p. 11). In general, some rural principals struggle with promoting school objectives, while simultaneously balancing diverse political, social, and personal interests of local parents and community members.

### Diverse Roles and Retention of Principals

As compared to urban principals, rural principals metaphorically wear many more dynamic hats. Simultaneously, rural principals often assume such roles as classroom teacher, instructional specialist, assessment leader, parent leader, change agent, and active community volunteer (Canales, Tejeda-Delgado, & Slate, 2008; Cortez-Jiminez, 2012; Wildy, 2004; Masumoto & Browne-Welty, 2009; Renihan & Noonan, 2012; Starr & White, 2009). Rural principals are sometimes called upon to be the principal of more than one school, too (Clarke & Stevens, 2006; Howley, Howley, Henrickson, Belcher, & Howley, 2012; Thompson, 2011). Other rural principals struggle with fulfilling their full-time administrative duties, while carrying heavy teaching loads, sometimes across multi-grades (Clarke, Stevens, & Wildy, 2006; Cortez-Jiminez, 2012; Starr & White, 2009; Taole, 2013). As compared to most urban school districts, rural principals are more involved dynamic realms of education and are less equipped with administrative supports (e.g., vice-principals, receptionists, curriculum specialists, etc.) (Bard, Gardener, & Wieland, 2005). Otherwise said, while principals of larger schools often have the capacity to delegate and share managerial tasks, this option is not commonly afforded to principals in rural schools (IEL, 2005; Starr & White, 2009).

For a variety of reasons including geographically-isolation, high expectations from parents, restricted budgets, and limited salaries, the recruiting and retaining of quality rural principals is a grave challenge commonly faced by many school districts (Arnold et al., 2005; Browne-Ferrigno & Maynard, 2005; Fusarelli & Militello, 2012; IEL, 2005; Lock et al., 2012; Lowe, 2006; Miller, 2004; Novak, Green, & Gottschall, 2009; Partlow & Ridenour, 2008; Wallin, 2009; Wildy & Clarke, 2005). Not only are rural school principals experiencing heavy, diverse workloads, aspiring school leaders fall witness to

rural principals over-extending themselves (IEL, 2005). This point exacerbates leadership succession problems, where aspiring school leaders do not desire the same fate they observed from their school principal (Brooking, Collins, Court, & O'Neill, 2003; DiPaola & Tschanen-Moran, 2003; Graham, Miller, & Paterson, 2009; Howley, Andrianaivo, & Perry, 2005; Starr & White, 2008). Schuman's (2010) study highlighted that, early in their teaching careers, many teachers were shoulder-tapped into applying for an administrative position. As a result, when these candidates became rural principals, they lacked extensive classroom experience. Lock et al. (2012) also found that the most common reason that current principals applied for a position in a rural school was because they were encouraged or invited to apply.

### Lack of Professional Development and Resources

Within the realm of education, there are mounting concerns about the deficiencies in preparation and the general lack of quality professional development for school leaders (Cortez-Jiminez, 2012; Dean, 2007). Arnold et al. (2005), Lock et al. (2012), and Salazar's (2007) research indicated that rural principals need unique forms of leadership development for their rural circumstance. Additional research highlights that particular topics need to be threaded into professional development for rural principals, including mutually beneficial school-community partnerships and relations (Harmon & Schafft, 2009; Cortez-Jiminez, 2012), financial management for rural schools (Williams & Nierengarten, 2011; Williams et al., 2009; Singh & Gumbi, 2009), and mentorship for rural principals (Brown-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006; Ingvarson, Anderson, Gronn, & Jackson, 2006). Budge (2006) and Caneles et al. (2008) believed that self-awareness programs would also prove valuable for rural principals and help them determine which jobs to personally address and which to delegate.

The immigration of families who have English as a Second Language (ESL) needs is a recent demographic shift seen within many rural school communities. Although urban areas tend to offer a range of language services and settlement facilities to assist international newcomers, rural communities tend not to have such amenities. In turn, welcoming new families to rural communities is a responsibility commonly bestowed upon the rural principal. In a Canadian study involving five schools in rural Alberta, Abbott and Rossiter (2011) underscored how some rural principals were charged with providing specialized English as a Second Language (ESL) professional development for teachers who, in turn, facilitated effective ESL teaching within the school

and community. In a study involving 276 California rural school principals, Cortez-Jiminez's (2012) found that many rural administrators were responsible for ESL staff hiring, creating a school environment welcoming to diverse ethnicities, and integrating, monitoring, and evaluating ESL programs. These responsibilities are especially challenging for rural principals who have often no ESL training and already struggle with fulfilling other leadership duties.

Much of the research on the professional development for rural principals documents that rural principals find it more difficult to network with other principals (Clark & Stevens, 2009; De Ruyck, 2005; Graham et al., 2009; Lock et al., 2012; Msila, 2012; Novak et al., 2009; Pietsch & Williamson, 2009). Drawing from British research targeting leadership in small (i.e., up to 100 students), medium, and large schools, Southworth (2004) concluded that principals of small schools were more isolated from leadership programs, resources, and fellow principals, as compared to leaders of medium and large schools. Other factors deterring rural principals from being able to professionally network both inside and outside their immediate school community include a lack of diverse views of staff members, the oppressiveness of an extreme workload, and the challenge and expense related to travel (Clarke & Stevens, 2006; Bizzell, 2011; Hogden & Wylie, 2005; Renihan & Noonan, 2012; Williams & Nierengarten, 2011). In response to this shortage of professional development opportunities, a school district in Kentucky released rural principals one day of the school week throughout one entire year to participate in a professional development program. This initiative transformed school leaders from being managers to instructional leaders of the school (Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006).

Depending on the school district's economic situation and tax levies, lack of funding is often a major issue faced by rural principals (Arnold, 2004). Limited funding exacerbates issues already established within many rural contexts. Examples of such issues include travel costs for professional development, travel cost for extracurricular sports, the absence of specialized teachers and a school guidance counsellor, aging infrastructure problems, and reliable access to the Internet. As the leader of the school, the rural principal is often ascribed to find *extra* money, to enable school programs and educational services (Munsch, 2004). Research highlights that a major concern for rural principals is effectively creating financially savvy school budgets (Williams, 2012; Williams, Nierengarten, Riordan, Munson, & Corbett, 2009; Singh & Gumbi, 2009). In turn, as compared to urban schools, rural principals

are commonly required to be more creative and do more on a constrained budget.

Due to tight financial restraints, successful grant writing has become an important skill and responsibility of rural principals (Williams et al., 2009). Based on an Australian study involving 90 principals, Starr and White (2008) suggested that, for some rural schools, the most influential medium for receiving extra finances lay in the principal's ability to prepare a solid, convincing case for a particular grant or award. Moreover, when funding requests are successful, there is ongoing work to ensure continuity of funding. For example, upon receiving funding, suitable teachers need to be hired, progress reports need to be submitted, and detailed evidence of student improvement needs to be supplied to funding agencies to preserve the flow of finances.

On the topic of resources, one of the most valuable resources in any rural school is its teachers; however, as compared to urban principals, rural principals tend to face greater challenges in attracting highly qualified candidates for teaching positions (Montgomery, 2013; William & Nierengarten, 2011). This point is especially true in the subjects/areas of technology (Cullen, Brush, Frey, Hinshaw, & Warren, 2006), high school sciences, mathematics, and French immersion (Kitchenham & Chasteauneuf, 2010), special needs (Dykes, 2009; Pietsch & Williamson, 2009), and ESL (Abbott & Rossiter, 2011; Cortez-Jiminez, 2012). As compared to urban principals, rural principals often have smaller staff numbers to lead; however, with a small staff, the type of professional relationship between the principal and teacher has a great influence on retaining rural teachers (Haar, 2007). Thus, in many ways, the retaining of quality rural teachers is intricately dependent upon the principal, his/her leadership tactics, and his/her relationships with staff members (Lock et al., 2012).

## Gender Discrimination

In the intersections between gender, leadership, and rural education, research highlights that although women comprise the majority of rural teachers, they represent the minority of rural principals (Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006; Clarke & Stevens, 2006; Wallin & Sackney, 2003). In a study from New South Wales (Australia), male rural principals were found to outnumber female rural principals by a ratio of 2:1, even although only 32% of the educational staff of the catchment area was male (Pietsch & Williamson, 2009). Similarly, in Iowa, an investigation of gender demographics in school leadership revealed that male principals outnumbered their female counterparts in rural high schools by 6:1

(Hollingsworth & Dude, 2009). Also, in a large American review of rural education (data collected from the National Education Association [1998]), Harmon (2003) highlighted that, as compared to urban schools, principals in rural schools were more likely to be male and less likely to represent minority groups. Additional studies also highlight that male candidates are more likely to be hired as principals in rural schools, as compared to female candidates. Reynolds et al.'s (2008) Canadian study involved interviews with administrators in five rural school districts in four Canadian provinces (i.e., British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Ontario, and Nova Scotia). Reynolds et al. (2008) found that gender negatively influenced women being hired as high school principals in some rural schools. A similar finding was reflected in both Schuman's (2010) case study and Bartling's (2013) case study involving four participants in rural mid-Western American state. In particular, Schuman's study also highlighted that career advancement for female rural principals was largely contingent on the need to move to a larger community or city. This point is supported by Hollingsworth and Dude's (2009) work where they found that female and male principals are equally represented in urban high schools in Iowa, but not in the rural schools in the same area.

For school leadership positions, rural community members tend to value the traits commonly associated with being male (Hyndman, 2009), and the idea of a female principal is sometimes rejected, questioned, and/or deemed unsuitable (Halsey, 2007). The ideal male principal is described by Sherman and Beaty (2010) as a married man who is receiving female spousal support and is not restricted by child and household responsibilities (e.g., childcare, cleaning, etc.). Also, evidence gained from studies on the general topic of leadership and gender (Eagly, 2005; Johansen, 2008) revealed that changes proposed by male leaders are more readily accepted than those suggested by female leaders. Eagly and Carli (2007) added, "In traditionally masculine settings . . . expert women are often discredited, but expert men are given the benefit of the doubt" (p. 113). While many of these issues represent societal and structural matters, Skrla (2003) provided an additional perspective on a woman's tendency for self-silencing. "Women are not expected to notice discrimination [and] to do otherwise is to risk censure for being labeled as a complainer, someone who expects special treatment, or perhaps the most pejorative term of all—a feminist" (p. 255). In considering the male-dominated venue of the principalship, coupled with the tradition-bound features of rural communities, female rural principals tend to face forms of gender discrimination.

## School Accountability and Change

In this modern-day era of educational accountability, school leadership has become increasingly stressful, political, complex, and time-consuming (Duke, Grogan, & Tucker, 2003). Starr and White (2008) described this intensified accountability as "a response to globalization, particularly with concern for international competitiveness in trade, workforce capacity, innovation, and educational outcomes" (p. 2). Within the school environment, there is great emphasis on implementing centralized policies, commissioning continuous/school improvement goals, and documenting improved student achievement as gauged through standardized test results, all of which have intensified the workload of principals (Bottery, 2004; Cortez-Jiminez, 2012; Larson & Howley, 2006; Lock et al., 2012; Renihan & Noonan, 2012; Pietsch & Williamson, 2009). These educational priorities require administrative compliance through completion of reports, tables, charts, and other documents. Mentioned previously, larger schools tend to have a sizeable administrative staff; however, rural principals often face accountability challenges alone even although they are required to meet the same accountability standards as their larger counterparts (Arnold et al., 2005; Ashton & Duncan, 2012; Canales et al., 2008). Furthermore, the recent introduction of outcomes-based education has necessitated that principals possess sophisticated knowledge about data-driving decision making and student assessment practices (Hellsten, Noonan, Preston, & Prytula, 2013; Renihan & Noonan, 2012). Studies verify that some rural principals struggling with the increase in managerial duties and specialized instructional leadership knowledge that have emerged from the implementation of accountability policies (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Blakesley, 2012; Pietsch & Williamson, 2009; Starr & White, 2008; Southworth, 2004; William & Nierengarten, 2011).

Intimately linked with this focus on accountability and instructional leadership is the idea of change. Rural community members tend to be culturally and historically attached to their community, possess high levels of social capital with other community members, and have family and friends who represent a similar socioeconomic status and views on life (Preston, 2010). In turn, rural community members possess a strong sense of belonging, pride, and appreciation for their community. In an effort to preserve this sociocultural harmony, rural community members are *placed* to be apprehensive of change. Because the culture of rural schools reflects the characteristics of the immediate community, the

concept of change is often a contentious issue for rural principals (Clarke & Stevens, 2006, 2009).

Within the last decade, educational policy development at government levels has targeted change to curricula, pedagogical approaches, and the reporting of school goals and performance. Policy implementation often requires that principals deal with less-than-positive internal reactions to these centralized, external pressures. Being the change agent of a rural school is more intense, as compared to urban schools, because the role of the rural principal is more visible and personalized within rural communities (Anderson & White, 2011; Eady & Zepeda, 2007). With regard to centralized policy implementation, Blakesley (2012) explained that educational leaders are often faced with an impasse when they attempt to mix local educational priorities within a centrally mandated system. His particular study exemplified school leaders and community members who attempted to implement a locally-developed curriculum focusing on the bison hunt; however, this local program had to be rewritten, repackaged, and relabelled to suit government-approved curriculum. Likewise, Foster and Goddard (2003) found that promotion of new policies and centralized curriculum is often difficult for rural principals, because mandates and course content often misalign with the needs of the local community.

In recent years, a policy changes that many rural principals have had to face focus on issues of standardized testing and measurable student success. As a background statement, on average, rural students tend to perform at a lower level than urban students on standardized tests (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008). Corbett (2007) explained that too often policy and its underlying theory are urban-centric:

The prevailing idea of standardized curriculum, standardized programs . . . and standardized test will continue to render school irrelevant for large numbers of students in rural, northern [Canadian], and coastal communities . . . Furthermore, this education approach will reinforce the idea that education is fundamentally about learning things that someone, somewhere decided to be important. This ethereal ‘somewhere’ is always, it seems, an urban place, and its abstract, standardized knowledge is necessarily divorced from the multiplicity of rural context. (p. 273)

In today's educational environment that touts the merits of standardized academic achievement, the rural principal walks a fine line between successfully leading this age of accountability and centralized policy, while simultaneously serving the local community and its needs, wants, and identity. Moreover, in many ways, this urban-rural comparison

is unjust as it fails to account for the slew of learning that students gain from living in a rural setting (e.g., more practical, hands-on skill sets and interactive social skills.). When test scores coincide with additional funding incentives from the federal government, as is the case in the United States with the *No Child Left Behind Act*, standardized testing represents a microcosm of capitalist society as the rich schools (in terms of funding and academic capital) get richer and the poor schools get poorer. Studies have shown that this rural school catch-up issue is taxing on students, teachers, and the leaders of rural schools (Powell, Higgins, Aram, & Freed, 2009).

## Conclusion

This overview of research highlighted that policymakers and senior educational leaders need to recognize that rural principals often face hiring constraints and lack professional development, administrative assistance, the acquisition of teachers across specialized areas, and physical resources. By default, rural principals are often recognized by both staff and the school community members as instructional experts in all subject areas, an extremely burdensome and heavy reputation to uphold. Additionally, rural principals sometimes wrestle with specialized parental involvement, are prone to gender discrimination, and, when tasked to implement change, need to lead staff and community members through the process. After policymakers and senior education leaders become cognizant of these key challenges, they need to foster and implement place-based policy through the application of a *rural lens* (Wallace & Boylan, 2007), rather than through an urban or bureaucratic outlook. This rural lens requires both a macro-level degree of understanding of rural places and their distinctiveness and a micro-level recognition of the differences that exist between individual rural schools (Clarke & Stevens, 2009).

Leadership in rural schools is multifaceted, place-conscious, and relationship-dependent; the needs and priorities of students, parents, and communities members require a leader who is knowledgeable about educational policies, yet receptive to the distinctive needs, perceptions, and culture of educational stakeholders of that rural community. Furthermore, because leadership in rural schools cannot be detached from the historical and social practices of the immediate community, rural principals must be able to nimbly mediate relations within the local community and the larger school system. The rural principal's ability to thrive under emotionally-charged, people-focused, school-community conditions is critical to leadership success

(Pashardis, Savvides, Lytra, & Angelidous, 2011). We appreciate that rural life creates unconventional circumstances for rural principals and that effective rural leadership is about adopting strategies that are responsive to realities of each individual rural community.

It is our hope that the information herein will assist governmental leader, policymakers, researchers, school leaders/teachers, parents, and community members who are interested in supporting and promoting successful leadership practices within rural communities. Although we articulated common challenges associated with the rural principalship, further research is required to more adequately

understand the contextual issues faced by rural school leaders. For instance, how do educational, social, political, and physical aspects of rural school leadership compare and contrast to urban school leadership? How does the culture in a rural community affect the way in which school principals make decisions and implement change? What leadership styles do rural principals tend to embody and why? What are common challenges are faced by female rural principals? What benefits are associated with the role of the rural principalship? These are just a few of the many research questions waiting to be addressed through future research.

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